

BOOK REVIEW
COPING WITH
LOSS: THE
THERAPEUTIC USE
OF LEAVE
TAKING RITUALS

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Coping with Loss: The Therapeutic Use of Leave-taking Rituals, Edited by Onno van der Hart. New York: Irvington Publishers, 1988. 200 pp.

A favorite meal in Amsterdam is the Indonesian *Rijsttafel* (or ricetable), in which a variety of dishes and sauces, each with its specific taste, are to be combined with rice. Customarily, the dishes are arranged around the rice, the unifying factor in the meal. In a like manner, van der Hart, as editor, has surrounded the theme of coping with loss with a diverse collection of contributions, both clinical and theoretical. The result is an interesting and useful introduction to an area of therapy that is relatively new, but has become the subject of considerable interest and excitement.

Coping with Loss furthers van der Hart's study of the role of rituals in psychotherapy, which began in *Rituals in Psychotherapy: Transition and Continuity* (1983; Dutch edition, 1978). Unlike traditional rituals in older societies, which are based on a mythological world view and corresponding religious myth shared by the healer, his patient, and the patient's family and friends, the ritual in western psychotherapy is a technique of strategic or directive therapy, and is based on a therapeutic myth, usually secular in nature, constructed by the therapist in terms of the world view of his patient, and to which the treatment is adapted. The ritual is used to help the patient make a successful transition from his being entrapped by a set of experiences to which he has not yet made a constructive adaptation to his making a new start in life. "The therapeutic leave-taking ritual is a rite of passage with the aid of which the client leaves behind him a certain unhappy situation and effects a new situation" (p.15). It consists of "prescribed symbolic actions that must be performed in a certain way and in a certain order, and may or may not be accompanied by verbal formulas" (p.15). In the words of the Norwegian contributors, Seltzer and Seltzer, "the common denominator underlying such therapeutic interventions . . . is the unfreezing or thawing of the relationship between subjective and objective time" (p.188).

After van der Hart summarizes his thoughts about rituals in the first three chapters, the next seven deal with the specific applications of rituals in psychotherapy. True to the theme of the book, they involve leave-taking, leave-taking from deceased significant others and from unpleasant aspects of one's own past. In one, a former prostitute becomes reconciled with her difficult life, in another Holocaust survivors are helped to grieve losses experienced decades before, and in many the deaths of spouses or parents are confronted. The clinical examples vary widely in the approaches used and in the attitudes of the therapists toward these techniques. In one vignette, a contributor

states plainly, "Reading about the use of rituals in therapy had made me an enthusiast" (p. 114), so he was eager to find an occasion on which to employ one. Because the illustrations are given by clinicians quite positive about the use of rituals, the case studies often are rather uncritical about the relative importance of the components of the interventions described and about their effectiveness.

The final four chapters constitute a section entitled "Reflections." It is the most successful portion of the book. Gersons' discussion of leave-taking rituals in the context of defensive structures and posttraumatic stress is very useful, de Tempe's anthropological approach to grief therapy is a helpful and circumspect attempt to place the contributions of the book in an historical and anthropologic perspective, and the Seltzers' chapter on leave-taking rituals in psychotherapy offers valuable insights.

This book would have benefited from a more extensive effort to familiarize the North American reader with the principles of short-term directive strategic therapy as it is practiced in Europe, especially in the Netherlands. The relatively abbreviated forms of treatment and the long periods of time between appointments that appear customary in many of the clinical examples in this book will not be familiar to many North American readers. Another addition that would have been helpful to the general reader is an explicit discussion of the importance of the work Milton H. Erickson and Maria Selvini Palazzoli to the ideas advanced in this book. In the opinion of this reviewer, the profound influence of these two clinicians is felt throughout. Brief summaries of their ideas would have been useful for the reader who is not grounded in both Ericksonian thinking and the strategic family therapy methods of the Milan school.

This book is an exploration of a new and intriguing aspect of psychotherapy, the overall importance and utility of which and the specific indications for which remain to be established. It is an excellent introduction for the reader who has not yet familiarized himself with the literature of the field, and an ideal investment for the busy clinician who wants to acquaint himself with the use of rituals in psychotherapy and explore how they might come to play a role in his therapeutic armamentarium.

With specific reference to those who work with dissociative disorders, this book contains much food for thought. Most multiple personality disorder patients have a great deal of difficulty coming to grips with their traumatic pasts, and must reconcile themselves to the loss of members of their family of origin, or a least to the defensively idealized images of those individuals.

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